

# THE WAY OF A MAN

By EMERSON HOUGH

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## CHAPTER XXI.

### A Confusion in Covenants.

DURING the next morning Harry Sheraton galloped down to the village after the morning's mail. On his return he handed me two letters. One was from Captain Matthew Stevenson, dated at Fort Henry, and informed me that he had been transferred to the east from Jefferson Barracks, in company with other officers. He hinted at many changes in the disposition of the army of late. His present purpose in writing, as he explained, was to promise us that, in case he came our way he would certainly look us up.

This letter I put aside quickly, for the other seemed to me to have a more immediate importance. I glanced it over and found occasion to request a word or so with Colonel Sheraton. We withdrew to his library, and then I handed him the letter.

"This," I explained, "is from Jennings & Jennings, my father's agents at Huntington, on whose advice he went into his coal speculations."

"I see. Their advice seems to have been rather disastrous."

"At first it seemed so," I answered, "but now they advise me by no means to allow foreclosure to be completed if it can be avoided. The lands are worth many times the price paid for them."

"I see. And they have some sort of an offer as well, eh?"

"A half loaf is better than no bread," I assented. "I think I ought to go out there and examine all this in detail."

"But one thing I don't understand about this," began Colonel Sheraton. "Your father's partner, Colonel Meriwether, was on joint paper with him. What did he say to you when you saw him?"

"Nothing," I replied. "We did not discuss the matter."

"What? That was the sole reason why you went out to see him?"

"Other matters came up," said I. "This was not brought up at all between us."

Colonel Sheraton looked at me keenly. "I must admit, Mr. Cowles," said he, slowly weighing his words, that of late certain things have seemed more than a little strange to me. If you will allow me so to express myself, there is in my own house since you came a sort of atmosphere of indefiniteness. Now, why was it you did not take up these matters with Colonel Meriwether? Certainly they were important to you, and under the circumstances they have a certain interest to myself. What are you trying to cover up?"

"Nothing from you of a business nature, sir, and nothing from Miss Grace of any nature which I think she ought to know."

He turned on me swiftly. "Young man, what do you propose to do in regard to my daughter? I confess I have contemplated certain plans in your behalf. I feel it is time to mention these matters with you."

"It is time," I answered. "But, if you please, it seems to me Miss Grace and I should first take them up together. Has she spoken to you in any way that might lead you to think she would prefer our engagement to be broken?"

"No, sir. There has only been a vagueness and indefiniteness which I did not like."

"Had my affairs not mended, Colonel Sheraton, I could not have blamed any of you for breaking the engagement."

"No," he said. "I am only a man, and I have only a heart."

"Then, if you please, sir, since I am rather awkwardly situated here, I should like very much to see Miss Grace this morning."

He bowed in his lofty way and left me. Within a half hour a servant brought me word that Miss Grace would see me in the drawing room.

She was seated in a wide, low chair near the sunny window, half hid by the leafy plants that grew in the boxes there. She was clad in loose morning wear over ample crinoline, her dark hair drawn in broad bands over the temples, half confined by a broad gold comb, save two long curls which hung down her neck at either side. It seemed to me she was very thin—thinner and darker than ever.

She held out her hand to me, and it lay cold and lifeless in my own.

"Perhaps I have been a little hurried after all in classing myself as an absolute pauper," I explained as she read my letter. "I must go out there and look into these things."

"Going away again?" She looked up at me, startled.

"For a couple of weeks. And when I come back, Miss Grace—"

So now I was up to the verge of that same old, definite question.

She sat up on the chair as though pulling herself together in some sudden resolve and looked me straight in the face.

"Jack," she said, "why should we wait?"

"To be sure," said I; "only I do not want you to marry a pauper if any act of my own can make him better than a pauper in the meantime."

"You temporize," she said bitterly. "You are not glad. Yet you came to me only last spring, and you—"

"I come to you now, Miss Grace," I said.

"Ah, what a difference between then and now!" she sighed.

For a time we could find nothing fit to say. At last I was forced to bring up one thing I did not like to mention.

"Miss Grace," said I, seating myself beside her, "last night, or rather, this morning after midnight, I found a man prowling around in the yard."

She sprang up as though shocked, her face gray, her eyes full of terror.

"You have told," she exclaimed. "My father knows that Captain Orme—"

It was my own turn to feel surprise, which perhaps I showed.

"I have told no one. It seemed to me that first I ought to come to you and ask you about this. Why was Orme there?"

She stared at me. "He told me he would come back some time," she admitted at length. All the while she was fighting with herself, striving, exactly as Orme had done, to husband her powers for an impending struggle.

"You see," she said, "he has secret business all over the country. I will own I believe him to be in the secret service of the inner circle of a number of southern congressmen and business men. He is in with the southern circle—of New Orleans, of Charleston—Washington. For this reason he could not always choose his hours of going and coming."

"Does your father know of his peculiar hours?"

"I presume so, of course."

"I saw a light at a window," I began, "whose window I do not know, doubtless some servant's. It could not have been a signal?"

"A signal? What do you mean? Do you suspect me of putting out a beacon light for a cheap night adventure with some man? Do you expect me to tolerate that sort of thing from you?"

"I ask you to tolerate nothing," I said. "I am not in the habit of suspecting ladies. But I ask you if you can explain the light on that side of the house?"

"Jack," she said, flinging out her hand, "forgive me. I admit that Captain Orme and I carried on a bit of a flirtation after he came back—after he had told me about you. But why should that—why, he did not know you were here."

"No," said I dryly. "I don't think he did. I am glad to know that you found something to amuse you in my absence."

"Let us not speak of amusements in the absence of each other," she said bitterly. "Think of your own. But when you came back it was all as it was last spring. I could love no other man but you, Jack. After all, if we are quits, let us stay quits and forgive and forget. Let us forget, Jack."

I sat looking at her as she turned to me, pleading, imploring in her face, her gesture.

"Jack," she went on, "a woman needs some one to take care of her, to love her. I want you to take care of me. You wouldn't throw me over for just a little thing, when all the time you yourself—"

"The light shone for miles across the valley," said I.

"Precisely, and that was how he happened to come up, I do not doubt. He thought we were still up about the place. My father has always told him to make this his home and not to go to the tavern. They are friends politically, in many ways, as you know."

"The light then was that of some servant?"

"Certainly it was. I know nothing of it. It was an accident, and yet you blame me as though—why, it was all accident that you met Captain Orme. Tell me, Jack, did you quarrel? What did he tell you?"

"Many things. He is no fit man for you to know nor for any woman."

"Do I not know that? I will never see him again."

ment. If conditions prove to be practically the same now as then it is she who must decide her course and mine."

"That is perfectly honorable. I have no criticism to offer. I have only her happiness at heart."

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"Many things. He is no fit man for you to know nor for any woman."

"Do I not know that? I will never see him again."

"No; he will never come back here again; that is fairly sure. He has promised that, and he asked me to promise one thing, by the way."

"What was that?"

"To keep my promise with you. He asked me to marry you. Why?"

Infinite wit of woman! What chance have we men against such weapons? It was coquetry she forced to her face and nothing else when she answered:

"So, then, he was hard hit, after all! I did not know that. How tender of him to wish me married to another than himself! The conceit of you men is something wondrous."

"Mr. Orme was so kind as to inform me that I was a gentleman and like-wise a very great ass."

"Did you promise him to keep your promise, Jack?" She put both her hands on mine as it lay on the chair arm. Her eyes looked into mine straight and full. It would have taken more imagination than mine to suspect the slightest flickering in their lids. "Jack," she murmured over and over again, "I love you. I have never loved any other man."

"So now," I resumed, "I have come to you to tell you of all these things and to decide definitely and finally in regard to our next plans."

"But you believe me, Jack? You do promise to keep your promise? You do love me?"

"I doubt no woman whom I wed," I answered. "I shall be gone for two or three weeks. I shall come back, Miss Grace, and I shall ask your answer."

"Jack, I'm sure of that," she murmured. "It is a grand thing for a woman to have the promise of a man who knows what a promise is."

I winced at this, as I had winced a thousand times at similar thrusts unconsciously delivered by so many.

"No," said I. "I think Orme is right. I am only a very stupid ass."

She reached out her hand. I felt her fingers close cold and hard on mine, as though loth to let me go. I kissed her fingers and withdrew myself at least very glad to be away.

I retired to my room to arrange my portmanteau for an early journey. And there, filling up one-half of the greater valise, was a roll of hide, ragged about its edge. I drew it out and spread it flat upon the bed before me, whitened and roughened with bone, reddened with blood, written on with rude stylus, bearing certain words which all the time, day and night, rang, yes, and sang, in my brain.

"I, John Cowles, I, Ellen Meriwether—take thee for better, for worse—till death—I saw her name—E-l-l-e-n."

Presently once more I departed. My mother also ended her visit at Dixiana, preferring to return to the quiet of her two little whitewashed rooms and the old fireplace and the sooty pothooks which our people's slaves had used for two generations in the past. As to what I learned at Huntington I need say no more than that I began to see fully verified my father's daring and his foresight. The matter of the coal land speculation was proved perfectly feasible.

All the details of surveying and locating lands, of measuring shafts and drifts and estimating cubic yards in coal and determining the status of tentures and fees, had occupied me longer than I had anticipated. I had been gone two days beyond a month when I pulled up at Wallingford.

As I approached the little tavern I heard much laughing, talking, footfalls, hurrying, as men came or went on one errand or another. A large party had evidently arrived on a conveyance earlier than my own. I leaned against the front rail of the tavern gallery and waited for some stable boy to come. I found my eyes resting upon a long figure at the farther end of the gallery, sitting in the shade of the steep hill which came down almost sharp as a house roof back of the tavern and so out of the evening sun. It was apparently a woman, tall and thin, clad in a loose, stately gown, her face hid in an extraordinarily long green sunbonnet. There was no one in all the world who could counterfeit Mandy McGovern.

Mandy's pipe well nigh fell from her lips. "Well, well, well! If it ain't you, son!" she exclaimed.

"Aunt Mandy," I interrupted. "Tell me, what in the world are you doing here?"

"Why, me and the folks just come down to look around. Her and her pa was comin', and I come too."

"Who came with you, Aunt Mandy?"

"Still askin' fool questions, like you didn't know! Why, you know who it was. The colonel's ordered to line his regiment at Fort Henry. Gal come along o' him o' course. I come along with the gal o' course. My boy and my husband come along with me o' course."

"Your son, Andrew Jackson?"

"Uh-huh. He's somewhere 'round. I reckon. I see him likin' a nigger a few minutes ago. Say, that boy's come out to be the lightest feller I ever did see. Him allowin' he got that there injun day we had the fight down on the Platte, it just made a new man out'n him. My man and me seen there was a good openin' there on the trail this side o' the south fork, and we set up a hotel in a dugout."

"But I don't quite understand about the man—your husband?"

"Yep, my latest one. Didn't you know I married ole man Auberry? He's round here somewhere, lookin' for a drink o' feller, I reckon."

"I hadn't heard of this last marriage of yours, Aunt Mandy," I ventured.

"Me and him hooked up right soon after you and the gal got lost."

"Where is Colonel Meriwether?" I asked her at last.

"Inside," she motioned with her pipe. "Him and the gal too. But, say, who's that comin' down the street there in that little sword o' weapon?"

I looked. It was my fiancée, Grace Sheraton. By her side was my friend, Captain Stevenson, and at the other end of the street was a fluttering and unattended to note that could be no one else but Ellen.

Kitty seemed first to spy me and started up with an enthusiastic waving of her gloves, personal veil and handkerchief, all held confusedly, after her fashion, in one hand. "P-r-r-r-r!" she trilled, schooling me, to attract my attention, meanwhile. "Howdy, you man! If it isn't John Cowles, I'm a sinner! Matt look at him! Isn't he old and soiled and soiled?"

"You said you would," began Grace hurriedly. "I was not expecting you today, but you have been gone more than two weeks longer than you said you would be."

Stevenson bent his head into the tavern after his first glance at me, and presently I saw him raised in surprise and Kitty's excited chatter. I heard Colonel Meriwether's voice answering. "I heard another voice."

"Who is in there?" asked Grace Sheraton of me curiously. I looked her slowly and fully in the face.

"It is Colonel Meriwether," I answered. "He has come on unexpectedly from the west. His daughter is here also, I think. I have not yet seen her."

"That woman!" breathed Grace Sheraton, sinking back upon her seat. Her eye glittered as she turned to me. "Oh, I see it all now! You have been with them! You have met her again! My God, I could kill you both—I could—I say I could!"

## CHAPTER XXII.

### Ellen or Grace.

I HAVE never met any of the Meriwethers," said Grace Sheraton. "Will you gentlemen present me?"

I had assisted her to alight, and at that time a servant came and stood at the horse's head. Stevenson stepped back to the door, not having as yet mentioned my presence there. There came out upon the gallery as he entered that other whose presence I had for some moments known, whom I knew within the moment I must meet—Ellen!

Her eyes fell upon me. She stepped back with faint exclamation, leaning against the wall, her hands at her cheeks as she stared. I do not know after that who or what our spectators were. I presume Stevenson went on into the house to talk with Colonel Meriwether, whom I did not see at all at that time.

The first to speak was Grace Sheraton. Tall, thin, darker than ever, it seemed to me, and now with eyes which flickered and glittered as I had never seen them, she approached the girl who stood there shivering. "It is Miss Meriwether? I believe I should know you," she began, holding out her hand.

"This is Miss Grace Sheraton," I said to Ellen, and stopped. Then I drew them both away from the door and from the gallery, walking to the shadows of the long row of elms which shaded the street, where we would be less observed.

For the first time in my life I saw the two together and might compare them. Without my will or wish I found my eyes resting upon Ellen. Without my will or wish, fate, nature, love, I know not what, made selection.

Ellen had not as yet spoken. "Miss Sheraton," I repeated to her finally, "is the lady to whom I am engaged to be married?"

The vicious Sheraton temper broke bounds. There was more than half a sneer on my fiancée's face. "I should easily know who this lady is," she said.

Ellen, flushed, perturbed, would have returned to the gallery, but I raised my hand. Grace Sheraton went on. "An engagement is little. You and he, I am advised, lived as man and wife, forgetting that he and I were already pledged as man and wife."

"That is not true!" broke in Ellen, her voice low and even. She at least had herself in hand and would tolerate no vulgar scene.

"I could not blame either of you for denying it."

"It was Gordon Orme that told her," I said to Ellen.

She would not speak or commit herself, except to shake her head and to beat her hands softly together as I had seen her do before when in distress.

"A gentleman must lie like a gentleman," went on Grace Sheraton mercilessly. "I am here to congratulate you both."

I saw a drop of blood spring from Ellen's bitten lip.

"What she says is true," I went on to Ellen. "It is just as Gordon Orme told your father and as I admitted to you. I was engaged to be married to Miss Sheraton, and I am still so engaged."

Still her small hands beat together softly, but she would not cry out, she would not exclaim, protest, accuse. I went on with the accusation against myself.

"I did not tell you. I had and have no excuse except that I loved you. I am here now for my punishment. You two shall decide it."

At last Ellen spoke to my fiancée. "It is true," said she. "I thought myself engaged to Mr. Cowles. I did not know of you—did not know that he had deceived me too. But fortunately my father found us before it was too late."

"Let us spare ourselves details," rejoined Grace Sheraton. "He has wronged both of us."

"Yes, he has done wrong," I heard Ellen say. "Perhaps all men do. I do not want to know. Perhaps they are not always so blameless. I do not want to know."

The measure of the two women was there in those words, and I felt it.

"Could you want such a man?" asked Grace Sheraton bitterly. I saw Ellen shake her head slowly. I heard her lips answer slowly. "No," she said.

"Could you?"

I looked to Grace Sheraton for her answer, and as I looked I saw a strange and ghastly change come over her face. "My God!" she exclaimed, reaching out her hand against a tree trunk to steady herself. "Your husband? No! But what is to become of me?"

"You wish him?" asked Ellen. "You are entirely free. But now, if you please, I see no reason why I should trouble you both. Please, now, I shall go."

But Grace Sheraton sprang to her side as she turned. "I was amazed at her look," I was conscious of her face not a moment. She held out her hands to Ellen, her face strangely distorted.

And then I saw Ellen's face change. She put out her hand to me. "There," she said, "time means so much. Let us hope—Then—her throat worked oddly, and her words stopped."

No man may know the speech which women exchange thought saw the two pass a few paces apart saw Grace Sheraton stoop and whisper something.

It was her last desperate resource. It won, as courage should, or at least as much as a lie may win at any time, for it was a bitter, daring, desperate, shaming lie she whispered to Ellen.

As Ellen's face turned toward me again I saw a slow, deep scorn invade it. "If I were free," she said to me, "if you were the last man on earth, I would not look at you again. You deceived me, but that was only a broken word and not a broken life! This girl—indeed she may ask what will become of her!"

"I am tired of all these riddles," I broke out, my own anger now arising and myself not caring to be made thus sport of petticoats.

"Your duty is clear," went on my new accuser, flashing out at me. "If you have a trace of manhood